

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

ON POWER AS A DISEASE

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Washington

The American President, no matter how fine a fellow he may be personally, is a hydra-headed monster. The job is too big, too complex, too spiked with responsibility for any one human being. It is small wonder that Presidents hide out in pomp, fantasy, the Burning Tree golf course, or Key Biscayne. That may be the only way to endure the job.

The President must be:

¶ *Commander in Chief of the "Free World."* Amaury de Riencourt writes in *The Coming Caesars*:

Today, one man is directly in command, either as peacetime President or wartime Commander in Chief, of more than half the world's economic and technical power. Along the militarized borders of the Western world, he is in full control as Augustus and the Roman emperors after him were in full control of the limes. . . . He is the only statesman of the Western world who can make decisions alone in an emergency. He is in control of a de facto empire into which the scattered fragments of the dissolving British Commonwealth are gradually being merged. Everywhere, on the European continent, in the

Western hemisphere, and in the Far East, he can make the weight of his incalculable power felt with immediate and crushing speed.

It might be pointed out, no one elected the American Chief Executive to this job. When the President made a recent grand pronouncement, the French journal, *Combat*, demanded: "Who authorized Mr. Nixon to speak in behalf of our planet?"

The United States bought and paid for the job. No other country was willing to spend so much money, energy and lives to save the world from the heathens. America was taking up, a little less mystically, where Nazi Germany had left off—saving the world for the superrace. The same superman, racial nonsense runs through the Manifest Destiny and Hitler's ravings. The economic cost is fairly steep—\$15 billion annually in economic and military aid, \$14 billion to maintain forces in NATO, \$21 billion to \$25 billion for the nuclear umbrella for NATO, and up to \$20 billion for the war in Indochina.

It hardly seems a desirable role, yet every President in the cold-war era, except General Eisenhower, took to it enthusiastically. They spent most of their time with generals, poring over maps and strategies; and they tended to lose sight of such mundane matters as schools, housing and the environment. There must be a sense of exhilaration in this exercise, for when the American President retires and goes home, the photographs he hangs in his study are of himself surrounded by bearded officers.

¶ *General Manager of the Federal Government.* This "most titanic operation ever envisioned involves itself in every activity known to man. It is even the landlord of bawdy houses in Nevada. No one any longer pretends that the megastate can be run efficiently or humanely, that the mail will arrive on time or the lowly citizen's voice be heard. The megastate is a wasteland of bureaucratic rulers, forms and petty despots.

The departments are huge, unmanageable empires, often at odds with one another. The Department of Agriculture pays \$2 billion a year to farmers not to produce more crops. The Department of the Interior spends billions to irrigate new farmlands to grow more food and fiber.

Presidents do not enjoy the housekeeping chore. They turn it over to cronies, political allies, ex-Congressmen, professional bureaucratic managers and big-business governors. When the populace cries out, the President names a commission whose solemn duty it is to file a report.

¶ *Manipulator of the Legislative Process.* The major spectator sport in Washington is the tug of war between the White House and the Capitol. It is no longer a fair game, for the President has too much weight on his side—the unestimated boodle of federal contracts that he passes out like an ancient Oriental pasha, the party political machinery, the control over a series of agencies which in turn oversee radio-TV, transportation, food and drugs, taxes and export licenses. The Congress, in a supplicating role, can hardly rise from its bended knee to fight off Presidential fiat.

¶ *Economic Czar.* We no longer indulge in the fancy that ours is a free economy; it is politically called a "managed economy," with the government at the controls. Taxes, government spending, controls, priorities are jiggled about, and the effect of this jiggling reaches far beyond America. When we spent, largely for military operations, more overseas than we took in, the world's monetary system was inflated with cheap dollars it could not digest, and a global recession seemed inevitable.

Since few Presidents know anything about economics, they turn its intricacies over to a succession of advisers, whom they switch about when the going gets rough. The only part of this job the President really handles is the exuding of confidence, the belief being that if the Chief Executive says business is good, people will raid their piggy banks.

¶ *Master Politician.* Every President wants to be re-elected. He watches the voters out of the corner of his eye, and hustles his aides to produce tricks to entertain and win the favor of the electorate. Nixon, a master of the staged act, thought the Cuban missile crisis was a superjob. It had everything—the good guys versus the bad, danger, suspense and a happy ending.

¶ *Great Oracle of the Temple of Washington.* The American people, with their religious fundamentalist background, are believed to yearn for an authoritarian, Jehovah-like figure, and the more so since religion has lost its hell-fire punch. The President is peculiarly well situated to play this part. He has power to reward or